

Trapped in Tragedies: Childhood Trauma, Spatial Inequality and Law

A conversation about intervention, prevention and pathology

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Thesis: Psychological Trauma as the Symptomatology of Structural Inequality

- Project: The interaction between law as an advocacy profession and everything we've heard so far today
- Fact Assumption 1: That the *sources* of trauma are found disproportionately in low-income, segregated communities
- Fact Assumption 2: That impoverished environments in the U.S. represent deliberate structural policy
- Theoretical assumption: That structural inequality is organized by institutions and their rules

Directions for advocacy: Three Questions

- 1. What are the most effective interventions and what risks are associated with them?
- 2. Do we risk pathologizing people experiencing complex trauma?
- 3. What does prevention look like?

The connection between complex trauma and structural inequality

- Spatial, or place-based, inequality is organized *institutionally* by structural inequality.
- The key question is, “How much does my institutional environment determine, or structure, my opportunities in life?”

Which institutions?

- Housing policies (promote safety, affordability?)
- Schools and education policies (safe, effective?)
- Local government agencies (responsive, inclusive, prof'l?)
- Health care (accessible, respectful, high-quality?)
- Police and criminal justice (respectful, trustworthy?)
- Transportation (comprehensive, affordable, reliable?)
- Employment and economic development (accessible?)
- FAMILY

The middle-class calculus

- People of means choose the best of these. Why?
- The strength, capacity and effectiveness of these institutions is a matter of RESOURCES & RULES.
- These RESOURCES & RULES vary a lot by PLACE.
- PLACE is often the repository of RACE and CLASS disparities.
- People without means have limited choice.

Poverty as a spatial trap

- Poor families often suffer from institutions that suffer severe resource deficits. They're overmatched.
- The institutional deficits are “**intersectional**.”
- Weak institutions follow different rules, compound the problems of individuals, exacerbate challenges and amplify risks. They struggle to meet needs and often compound them with “setback dynamics.”
- None of this is accidental, merely structural, in that it reflects decades of policies toward poor, especially nonwhite, families.

Relationship to trauma?

Being poor in segregated, isolated resource-poor neighborhoods (features of concentrated poverty) increases stress and conflict while taxing resiliency and draining individual capacity.

A restatement of the trauma crisis

The *cause* of such pervasive childhood trauma is being trapped by policy in structurally diminished environments where violence is too common and personal and institutional resources are limited by inequitable arrangements.

How do we respond?

- Legal Interventions:
 - Special ed expansion
 - Special ed litigation
 - Trauma-sensitive schools
 - Others

Pathology Risk

- Are kids exposed to traumatic experiences “disabled”?
- Can we count on most public institutions (especially schools) to classify and treat effectively and consistently?
- What prevents the unintended consequence of (re-)branding children of color as pathologically “broken”, especially given the history of pathologizing African-American families?

Prevention

- Fundamentally, we want to *eliminate*, not treat, the sources of trauma as we would a public health crisis
- Consider a gunshot: internalization where traumas happen, but externalization where they don't
- In this political age of late-stage capitalism, I suggest more innovative uses of local authority

“Set-back Dynamics”

“Set-back”: Something that derails purpose, an obstacle to moving forward along a more stable, chosen route (e.g., evictions, forced moves, job losses, detention)

1. “UNTRAPPED”

Helping people follow their mobility instincts or remain (e.g., state and federal fair housing and anti-eviction law)

2. “UNENCUMBERED”

Doing trauma-informed institutional reform to ease parental stressors (e.g., child welfare practices, debtors’ prisons, school discipline policies)

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